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ABSTRACT

This paper makes a case for the existence and study of the wisdom of practice by looking at educational practitioners' concepts as its locus and source. (These concepts may also be described as the accumulated "folk wisdom" of the teaching community). These communal concepts, part of an accumulated lore regarding teaching and education in general, have evocative, generative, and delimiting functions in the creation of a teacher's universe of alternatives for choice. This paper inquires into the interaction of these communal concepts with a teacher's capacity for choice, and examines how the professional folklore surrounding a teacher may affect decision-making processes. Of human choice and change the paper offers a conservative, rather than a rationalistic viewpoint, which is in turn applied to the practice and theory of education itself. (Authors/LH)

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PRACTITIONERS' CONCEPTS:

AN INQUIRY INTO THE WISDOM OF PRACTICE

Margret Buchmann

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Abstract

This paper makes a case for the existence and study of the wisdom of practice by looking at practitioners' concepts as its locus and source. These communal concepts are part of an accumulated lore pertaining to teaching. They have evocative, generative, and delimiting functions in the creation of a teacher's universe of alternatives for choice. The paper inquires into the interaction of communal concepts with a teacher's capacity for choice. Of human choice and change it offers a conservative rather than a rationalistic view, and it applies this view to education.

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Practitioners' Concepts: An Inquiry into the Wisdom of Practice

Margret Buchmann[1]

Research on teaching currently places emphasis on the wisdom of the practitioner. Wisdom points to communal tradition and to the past. It suggests a range of well-tried solutions to recurrent practical problems. But school teachers tend to repudiate past experience; they do not accept the idea of a common memory linked to abiding dilemmas in teaching (Lortie, 1975, p. 70). If there is no accumulated lore of teaching to draw on, to invoke the wisdom of practice fails to make sense.

The evidence, however, is not conclusive. The repudiation of tradition does not signify the absence of tradition, or its lack of influence on thought and behavior. Teachers' attitudes about a common memory cannot by themselves settle the issue of its existence or operation. The question of the wisdom of the practitioner is therefore still open.

This paper makes a case for the existence and study of the wisdom of practice by looking at practitioners' concepts as its locus and source. It inquires into the interaction of communal concepts with a teacher's capacity for choice. Of human choice and change it offers a conservative rather than a rationalistic view, and it applies this view to education.

The first part of the paper analyzes practitioners' concepts as guiding myths. The second part investigates what constitutes a teacher's capacity for choice. Capacities are distinguished from skills, and the

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availability of options to the mind is considered. In conclusion I suggest that a teacher's sense of intuitive rightness and his credibility can be strengthened through reliance on the communal concepts of practitioners. However, sensible use of practitioners' concepts demands acts of interpretation and discrimination.

Practitioners' Concepts as Guiding Myths

The characterization of practitioners' concepts as myths brings up two major themes of this paper: the confluence of thought and affect in practical judgment and the possibility of original thought within the boundaries of communal tradition.

Myths are metaphoric, hence ambiguous and open to interpretation. Myths invite the imagination, but inspire an awe which derives from the felt weight of the communal past. In a smaller, less awesome way practitioners' concepts are guiding myths of teaching, of teaching in general or in certain subject matters. They contribute to the accuracy, balance, and speed of practical judgment in teaching.

Myths are collective and traditional. They do not describe unique facts, but refer to experience. They tell of aspirations and failures and of dilemmas which are the common human lot. Myths are inspired by good sense, which is composed of reason and feeling. They guide thought and behavior. But the range of options perceived or generated under the guidance of myths varies among individuals.

Practitioners' concepts are elements of speech, be they single words, nouns with qualifying attributes, or short phrases of a descriptive, prescriptive, or explanatory nature. If this is granted, one will wonder how practitioners' concepts can be characterized as myths. Myths, like the tale of Prometheus, run to more than single words or phrases.

This objection can be met in two ways. First, the term mythical used in the characterization of practitioners' concepts can be taken metaphorically rather than in a literal sense. That is to say, to speak of practitioners' concepts as myths is to make an emphatic comparison. Such a comparison does not require that the objects compared be in all aspects alike. It highlights some aspects of practitioners' concepts: their collective origin, their richness and evocative power, their regulative function, and the "conservation of insight" (Mead, 1978) which is inherent to them.

On the other hand, apposite words or phrases can reveal a whole story in a flash, a story about which there is shared understanding among people who belong to a community. The word "homestead," for example, brings to mind an American myth which is a tale of individual and social aspirations and failures. Practitioners' concepts do likewise allude to more than is spelled out in the word or words they are composed of.

The Guiding Function of Practitioners' Concepts

To clarify the guiding function of practitioners' concepts for thought and action, I will take recourse to Ludwig Wittgenstein's "language-games." Language-games are patterned human activities with social, historical, mental, and behavioral components; words are an integral part of language-games.

Language-games have a point. They are tied closely to human interest, and that in two directions. The concepts which are a part of language-games "are the expression of our interest and direct our interest" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 151e). In concepts, the past and the future are, as it were, back to back. Concepts express past concerns and have a regulative function for future concerns.

L.S. Vygotsky notes, similarly, that the planning function of speech leads to a relationship between word and action in which "speech guides, determines, and dominates the course of action" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 28). He suggests that words shape activities. But activities can, in turn, be changed and reshaped through the use of language. A.S. Luria agrees with Vygotsky that words are correlates of consciousness (Luria, 1978, p. 7). That is to say, by Vygotsky's definition of consciousness, words are correlates of a substantive socio-historical system of meanings. This system is based on practical activity and directs practical activity.

The point of drawing on Wittgenstein, Vygotsky, and Luria is to put into relief the function of words -- and therefore of the concepts of practitioners -- as potent auxiliaries for thought and action. Words have inherent relations to practical activity and to a communal past by which future thoughts and acts are regulated, but not fully governed. Words are capable of throwing up new understandings and of triggering new activities.

A caveat needs to be entered here. Not every chance word or phrase by a practitioner is laden with good sense and meaning. Practitioners' concepts have in common with theoretical ideas in anthropology that they may be "unproductive, strained, or vacuous" (Geertz, 1973, p. 27) and yet not die a natural death. But problems with moribund concepts will be less severe for the language of practitioners. A lack of usefulness shows up readily in the domain of the practical. Still, one needs criteria by which to single out practitioners' concepts of greater or lesser productivity and significance.

Productivity and defensibility are criteria by which Geertz judges

theoretical ideas in anthropology; they "must be capable of continuing to yield defensible interpretations as new social phenomena swim into view" (Geertz, 1973, p. 27). For theoretical anthropology, the criterion of defensibility can be met, for example, through the intelligibility of an interpretation to cultural informants, and through its consistency with a frame of reference. But when one stipulates that the pragmatic value of practitioners' concepts must be controlled by defensibility, defensibility takes on a larger meaning. In the realm of the practical it is not enough that interpretations make sense, they must be ethically defensible. Although, to satisfy this stipulation, it is not necessary to draw on moral treatises or ethical theories. I will return to the question of practical ethical judgment toward the end of my argument.

The Latent Wisdom of Traditional Concepts

Beliefs which are held without reliance on proof, which no empirical evidence can show to be either true or false, may be classed as prejudices. Their justification does not rest on truth, but on rightness. That is to say, they must be reasonable and just, or defensible in the larger sense invoked above. The accumulated lore of groups is full of beliefs or "general prejudices." Edmund Burke contends that such traditional beliefs or concepts have a latent wisdom which is not easily exhausted:

> Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, *and they seldom fail*, they think it more wise to continue the prejudice with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice, and to leave nothing but the *naked reason*; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence. (Burke, 1790/ 1962, p. 105, italics mine)

Burke's argument is subtle, almost sly. For the study of practitioners' concepts it implies that, if one searches for their latent wisdom, one will seldom fail to find it. This must not be so because wisdom was there, ready to be discovered; it could have been invented. But invention takes place under the discipline of the collective past.

The ball, then, is in the court of the interpreter. That means it is in the court of those educational researchers, teacher educators, and teachers who appeal to traditional wisdom as represented by the concepts of practitioners. Hence, to believe in the wisdom of practice does not oblige one to strike an attitude of unthinking awe and acceptance. The communal concepts of practitioners should definitely be explored. But their exploration will profit from having an influx of what is new and different, from knowledge other than that of practitioners, and from bearing in any case the stamp of original thought.

Burke does not think an individual's stock of reason will get him very far. But neither will an ample store of "naked reason," or reason without feeling. Action and thought need commitment and affection. In part, affection for things, ideas, and practices is based on the fact of permanence. People care for what is abiding. Through being part of a tradition, the communal concepts of practitioners thus appeal to the minds *and* hearts of teachers. This is important, for it has been shown that efforts at educational change which do not rest on teacher's commitments are not liable to succeed (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978, p. 72).

Commitments have a bearing on behavior. This point is brought out in the following discussion of teachers' capacity for choice, especially in the analysis of capacities versus skills.

Teachers' Capacity for Choice[2]

Capacity is an intriguing word. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, it signifies a volume or content and implies with this certain limits. It denotes, furthermore, the active power of the mind and also its ability to take impressions, to receive. The phrase "to act in the capacity of" projects, on the other hand, a social role. To take on a role means to take on responsibilities and duties. The next section examines the distinction between skills and capacities in terms of the distinction between having a skill and acting in a capacity.

Skills and Capacities

If one acts in a certain capacity, one assumes the rights and duties allied to a social role as best one can or may. This sense of capacity is highlighted by the following example. An individual may formally be instituted as a child's teacher. Yet no conceptual mistake is committed by saying: "Mary's teacher does not act in the capacity of a teacher to her." But imagine a conversation between two colleagues of Mary's teacher. In conclusion, one says to the other -- "She has the skills of a teacher, although . . ." Both teachers shrug their shoulders. The burden of this remark is, "She really could, but she won't."

While the possession of the teacher's skills stands undisputed, one can deny that she acts in the capacity of a teacher to Mary. It is possible to counter that the distinction between skills and capacities I am making comes down to using or not using one's skills. But, though not using one's skills may be part of not acting in the capacity of, say, a teacher,

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[2]Much of the inspiration for this paper came from a brief paragraph by Harnischfeger and Wiley (1976, p. 38) on teacher planning in which the authors mention the importance of teachers' capacities for choice and describe the problem of choice as a "basic but neglected aspect of research on teaching"

there is something to taking on a role which cannot be reduced to the possession and use of skills.

If teachers are to act in the capacity of, for example, decision makers, they need more than a modicum of intelligence and decision-making skills. They need to understand the responsibilities and the occasions for decision making which their work involves. In addition, they need to be inclined to take on these responsibilities and to take advantage of these occasions. To act in the general capacity of a teacher means to take on a role, a bundle of socially desirable behaviors. In taking on a role, one makes it to a certain degree one's own, one makes a personal commitment. That, too, is desirable.

Reflection shows that skills by themselves won't get the desirable done. There are needed, in Israel Scheffler's terminology, teachers who not only know *how* to do certain desirable things, but who also are *inclined* to do them. In education, at any level, a reliance on skill acquisition is therefore troublesome. This is not to say that skills do not have their place -- in science, carpentry, education, and elsewhere. But by themselves they cannot deliver the kinds of guarantees on actual conduct about which social institutions such as education must be concerned.[3]

Inclination rests on habit and feeling. Guarantees on conduct can be delivered by habits. Burke thinks that affection and habit go together. John Stuart Mill suggests that even feeling can be schooled by habit:

> Both in feeling and in conduct habit is the only thing which imparts certainty; and it is because of the importance to others of being able to rely absolutely on one's feelings and conduct, and to oneself of being able to rely on one's own, that the will to do right ought to be cultivated into this habitual independence. (Mill, 1861/1939, p. 928).

What I have said about skills and capacities can be rephrased in terms of

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[3]This section is influenced by the ethics of Plato and Aristotle. I have also profited from reading W.A. Hart (1978).

habit. It applies, of course, not only to teachers, though I will keep them in their focal position. Teachers are needed who do not only have the skills requisite for making good choices, but who take on the role of chooser and are habitually inclined to make good choices.

As part of an accumulated lore of teaching, practitioners' concepts have roots in affection and habit. As communal concepts emerging from practical concerns, they bear on right conduct and on responsibilities. Introduced as an element into teacher education, they will be more likely to bring teachers to the point of sustained commitment, than to build skills. Reliance on practitioners' concepts may therefore help teachers to act in the capacity of teachers. By the above argument, this is an important, if tentative, conclusion.

In what follows, I will comment on the more descriptive aspects of "capacity for choice" and on the availability of options to the mind.

Availability of Alternatives and Capacity for Choice

Capacity for choice depends on a storehouse of alternatives available to the mind. Using capacity in this sense, one thinks of a certain volume, filled with alternatives "to capacity." Where only a couple of alternatives can be brought to mind, capacity for choice seems a rather grand term. But quantity by itself is not helpful. As Richard J. Shavelson remarks:

> Unfortunately we have few criteria for judging whether a longer list of alternatives is more likely to contain better choices for teaching. Nor do there exist guidelines that teachers trained to generate (or recognize) alternatives can use to judge the probable effectiveness of those alternatives. Both issues warrant considerable attention in future research (Shavelson, 1976, p. 388).

To aim at the generation of more alternatives in a teacher's mind does not by itself increase the likelihood of an increasing number of desirable alternatives among them. Even if there were an increase of

good choices, they will have to be identified as such. These are two hefty problems. But the chooser can be put out of countenance, too, by an embarassment of what he knows to be riches.

A list of alternatives that is long and has contents of varying degrees of excellence presents its own problems. Someone entering Aladdin's cave is struck dumb and doesn't know how to decide. Taking some time to make one's choice is alright for a treasure cave. A classroom decision arrived at in this manner may, however, be outdated before it can be implemented. For all problems of life, Søren Kierkegaard observes, the moment of deliberation does not really exist. It is imaginary like the point in geometry. Life is pressing forward and beyond the alternatives which the reflecting mind still considers. The longer the mind stares at them, the less they exist (Kierkegaard, 1843/1959, pp. 167-168). In education the appropriateness of alternatives for choice tends to be time-specific; and that holds not only for the classroom.

Alternatives must be grasped quickly and firmly. They must spring to mind vividly and distinctly to register among the many other impressions received. For, practical decisions cannot be made in contemplative leisure and in a solitude free from distractions. If, therefore, the chooser's mind is to be kept sufficiently nimble and, as it were, on top of things, some parsimony must control the generation of even worthwhile alternatives. An expansion of the universe of alternatives is useful to the extent that its contents are manageable and can, in fact, be judged by the teacher in terms of their worth. Hence it would be expedient if alternatives could intuitively be prejudged for their rough appropriateness.

The reader will anticipate my line of reasoning at this point. An appeal to practitioners' concepts as guiding myths adjusts the generation

of alternatives for the limited information processing capacities--generic and situational--of the teacher's mind. By virtue of being an appeal to traditional wisdom, it loads the dice for the rough appropriateness of a whole set of alternatives for choice.[4] That is to say, the appeal foreshadows a range of more or less acceptable options which reflect past practices and ways of thinking, and which have worked more often than not.

What is thought of in this fashion by someone new at the game may sometimes astonish an old hand. But, though metaphorical and ambiguous, practitioners' concepts are not amorphous and susceptible to any interpretation. Hence the imagination is to some extent restrained. The overall number of alternatives for choice evoked or generated is controlled indirectly, by controlling the number of headings under which alternatives are assembled. In other words, by an appeal to practitioners' concepts, a teacher's mind is set on a course of thinking under well-tried headings, and not under any, or any number of headings, that it can itself produce.

The question of how to ensure rightness in teacher decision-making bears further argument. Conveniently enough, it seems that the goals of rightness and of speed can be aimed at together.

Speed and Rightness in Teacher Decision-Making

For practical judgment on the spot, thought processes are required which are less ponderous than reflection and deliberation. Immediate responses are typically needed for ethical judgments in ordinary life. I will draw on F.H. Bradley's theory of moral judgment to look at the issue of promptness and dispatch in the making of decisions, as it is related to the appropriateness of decisions.

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[4] Lee S. Shulman and Arthur S. Elstein (1975, pp. 36-37) argue that the intellectual processes which define whole sets of more or less acceptable behaviors are of primary interest for problem-solving.

"Not only the woman but the man who 'deliberates' may be lost", F.H. Bradley maintains. He speaks about moral judgment, not about the moral reflections and ethical theories of philosphers, but of the moral judgment of ordinary men and women on particular cases. Bradley contends that this operates by an "intuitive subsumption"; it is "immediate judgment." In practical situations which call for moral judgment we "say we 'see' and we 'feel'. . ., not we 'conclude'" (Bradley, 1952, p. 194). Rarely do we ponder. And this is well, for time is pressing.

On the other hand, these judgments are not capricious and isolated. They stand in close and systematic relation to their basis, " ordinary morality", which one imbibes by precept and example. The principles of ordinary morality thus need not be explicit, although they can be made explicit. Ordinary morality is, of course, communal. Its precepts are linked to significant traditional concepts and to significant examples, that is, descriptions of particular cases. (It is interesting to reflect that precepts are not only authoritative commands or moral maxims, but have also been defined as the practical rules of an art.)

For what is *right* then, "courses suggest themselves, and one is approved of, because intuitively judged to be of a certain kind. . ." (Bradley, 1952, p. 196). Because what is the point of the matter at hand may be seen differently by different people, subsumptions in moral judgment can be made under different heads. But different subsumptions are made *within* the bounds of "ordinary morality". They must be defensible on its terms, and by its interpretation. Bradley's tenets thus offer a paradigm for practical judgment in teaching. If practitioners' concepts are communal concepts with valuative and descriptive elements, judgment under their guidance may well work like an appeal to ordinary morality with its precepts and examples. That is to say it may work by intuitive subsumption which tends to ensure -- with some diversity -- rightness, defensibility,

and promptidude.

We cannot afford to have teachers be, in Burke's words, "hesitating in the moment of decision, skeptical, puzzled, and unresolved." But where the sense of intuitive rightness eludes a teacher, more will be lost than time. There may be a loss of teacher credibility.

Credibility: The Fiduciary Basis of Teaching[5]

The promptness of decision and action which inspires confidence in self and others shows that one knows how to see things right, that one can draw on the storehouse of communal experience and customs, using its precepts and examples. Credibility suffers when there is a vast degree of reflection, with its vacillations and its aura of uncertainty. Actions and decisions which proceed from trust and confidence will inspire trust and confidence.

To put this another way, good faith in self is an element of teacher efficacy, of the power of the teacher to produce effects, and to effect the object intended. Such good faith is not self-complacency. Rather, it is the reverse of the vast and unprofitable uncertainty which William James described 75 years ago:

> Altogether it does seem as if there were a certain fatality of mystification laid upon the teachers of our day. The matter of their profession, compact enough in itself, has to be frothed up for them in journals and institutes, till its outlines often threaten to be lost in a kind of vast uncertainty. Where the disciples are not independent and critical-minded enough . . . we are pretty sure to miss accuracy and balance and measure in those who get a license to lay down the law to them from above. (James, 1958, p. 23)

Practical judgment in teaching is not a matter of deduction from theories, ethical or psychological. Its rightness is not substantially advanced by the learning of the principles or facts covered by theories. And there

[5]Harry S. Broudy (1979) looks at cognate issues in an article on tacit knowing.

is the possibility that the sense of rightness may be obscured, the certainty of practical judgment shaken by theory to no good purpose.

In practical contexts, what matters is not truth but rightness. Rightness does not flow necessarily or solely from truth. Nor does rightness flow only from goals projected or choices embraced, but from the way intentions are carried out and choices are lived. Choices can thus be made right after the fact. But where the sense of the rightness of his conduct fails a teacher, even the truth of theory--could it be assumed--cannot restore his credibility to him, in his own eyes and in the eyes of his students.

To conclude, Hippocrates says in the *Aphorisms* that: "Life is short and art is long, the occasion instant, decision difficult, experiment perilous." Teaching is an art, and the arts are not encompassed within the life span of one individual or one generation. If my argument regarding practitioners' concepts is reviewed in the light of Hippocrates's saying, it would seem that such concepts will answer as expedients for the practical arts of teaching. They will not answer for an individual teacher's conduct in the classroom: they leave and must leave her in charge. But the imagination which feeds on the metaphorical character of the guiding myths of teaching is not accidental and capricious. It has the dignity of good sense and of passion; it interacts in both these aspects with a teacher's capacity for choice.

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